

## 1998 ADDRESS BY STEVE GAW SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

My grandfather turned 85 last year. In 1912 he was born in the hills south of Keytesville, Mo., where his great grandfather had located 70 some years before. His family---mother, father and four other siblings that would eventually become seven, lived on a few acres of hill ground in a house made of vertical boards.

In the winter brown paper would be placed around the walls to slow the wind from between the boards -- but providing little insulation from the cold. The family packed water from spring-fed ditches for drink and made meals, often composed of wild game, gravy, and things from the garden.

Pap, my grandfather's dad, would grow sweet potatoes and strawberries, trap furs and find farm labor jobs to bring in cash. It was a tough existence.

A lot has changed in the 85 years of my grandfather's life. The old horse drawn wagon that he rode with his mother to town in has been replaced by the automobile and the airplane; the woodstove by electric and gas heat; face-to-face communications by video conferencing and cell phones.

My grandfather's fifth grade education which served well enough to develop a trucking business and put together a large farming operation, would not be adequate preparation in the high tech world of today.

But as much as it has changed some things have not. My grandfather's parents wanted he and the rest of their children to be safe and healthy, to have a better life than they had, and to have the hard times making ends meet made easier. They wanted their children to be able to fulfill their dreams. In 85 years the desires of families in the hills south of Keytesville or in any other part of this state or nation have not changed.

So what does it mean to us as a state legislature?

All of us are here to serve the people of our districts, and to collectively serve the people of this state. Hopefully we are here in part to make this state a better place for all of us live, work and raise our families -- to address the desires of families that have not changed, in a world that does.

In the last four years I believe we have made positive strides for families in Missouri. Missouri's economy, overall, is doing great. In the last year we have seen the creation of 62,000 new jobs, and we closed the year with a 3.6 percent unemployment rate. More than 2.7 million Missourians are working, which far surpasses all previous records in this state.

We serve a state that is rated third best financially managed in the country, one of a handful with a AAA bond rating, giving us the best possible interest on our bonds. And year after year we balance our budget in a state ranked 49th in the nation in tax burden as a percent of personal income.

Last year we were able to make it a little easier for families to make ends meet by eliminating the general sales tax on food. We made health care more accessible to our families by passing protections in a managed care bill that has become a model for the nation.

Two years ago we worked to raise the dismal immunization rate of young children in Missouri, protecting our children against dangerous illness and saving us all money by investing in prevention of illness instead of the treatment of it. In 1997, the immunization rate has risen an unprecedented 12 percent in just two years.

Welfare reform measures adopted in Missouri before the federal mandates have helped reduce Missouri's roles by 83,000. Workers' compensation reforms have taken skyrocketing rates that were making it difficult on Missouri's businesses and sent them rocketing downward.

Tough criminal sentencing laws requiring 85 percent of the sentence to be served before parole eligibility for dangerous felons and life sentences for sexual predators have helped make our streets and homes safer for our families.

And - very important - increased accountability for our schools coupled with fully funding the state's school foundation formula have reduced class sizes, given us more of the learning tools necessary for our children to be viable in the coming millennium and helped our ACT scores to rise faster than the national average.

This year we have an opportunity to continue to work for those goals that will maintain by our families. We have the opportunity to continue to offer help to hardworking Missourians trying to make ends meet.

Last year, we dropped taxes on food - something everybody needs. This year, let's give tax relief on something else everyone must have - shelter. Let us give an income tax credit toward a part of property taxes Missourians pay on their homes. And let us also not forget our seniors - without whom none of us would be where we are today - by expanding the property tax relief for seniors in Missouri laws.

I know that everyone in this chamber can, and in most cases will, think of many ways to cut taxes. But in a state that is 49th in tax burden and which must balance its budget, let us remember that revenue losses can adversely affect our children's future and the safety of our families as a result of cuts in law enforcement and corrections.

One of the most serious threats to Missouri has come from a drug that all of us have heard too much about in this state - meth. Missouri is at the top of the charts in production of meth in this country.

Over and over many of us have heard the stories of the ways meth affects the individual who uses it. But, it doesn't stop there - stories of families torn apart by the use of the drug, children exposed to its manufacture and use, happy lives turned to nightmares and sometimes extinguished.

Many of us have listened to law enforcement, community and family suggestions for additional tools in the battle against this drug. We cannot allow this horrible drug to destroy any more young people, any more families in this state.

Missouri has done much in the last few years to make this state an unwelcome place for sexual predators who prey on children and women. This year we have the opportunity to go further by adopting legislation that will allow dangerous public safety risks to be kept off our streets.

Let us work to pass a constitutional civil commitment law in Missouri for dangerous sex offenders with a propensity to add more victims to their lists.

The future of this state depends in large part on the opportunities of our children. The surest opportunity I know lies in education. Just as importantly, our children's ability to have a life that is better than ours depends in part upon their ability to be successful financially. For most of us, that means finding a good job.

If my grandfather has seen changes in this lifetime, it is likely that they will pale in comparison to what we will see. In the last 25 years those changes have been dramatic. Twenty-five years ago there were two military super powers -- today the U.S. is alone. Twenty-five years ago we were the only economic super power, now we share that place with Japan and the gradually uniting countries of Europe. The new economic competition to a great extent will affect the standard of living that workers have.

Jobs are more and more readily moved to cheaper labor markets. If we want to maintain higher standards of living, our workers must have higher skills that are in demand. To help give Missourians an advantage I propose that we focus some of our resources for higher education, including technical training, in a new program designed to give incentives for Missouri students to study in fields of high need in the state.

This program would offer loans to students in qualifying fields. These loans could be forgiven if the student graduates in that field and stays in Missouri. Missouri businesses would gain by having more individuals with needed skills and incentives for these students to stay in this state after graduation. Missouri would be assured its investment would pay dividends and, hopefully, this will attract more industry that operates with highly skilled jobs. A three way partnership between Missouri businesses, the people of the state, and Missouri students will benefit all the partners.

While we've done much to improve access to adequate health care, there is still a lot room for improvement. Each of us in this room has access to affordable health insurance upon election to this body. Yet, we still have 175,000 uninsured children in this state and we should not let another session go by without making health insurance for children more accessible to parents. Surely if this U.S. Congress can pass legislation and provide money for this purpose, this legislature can find a way to help parents' efforts to insure their kids.

But health insurance is not just an issue affecting children, it affects others as well, including many owners of small businesses who struggle to find affordable health insurance for

themselves, their families, and their employees. Let us look for want for these Missourians to help themselves in this endeavor.

Our families today have new and more difficult challenges to face than they did in my grandfather's youth. The necessity of making ends meet often means that children will be placed with others for their care. Parents have a right to know if they wish to inquire about criminal backgrounds of individuals providing care for their children. They should not have to wait to find out because of injury or death to their own child. Similarly, individuals being cared for in their homes ought to have a right to know about individuals who have a history of taking advantage of those who they are serving. And we are not going to allow teachers who have seriously hurt someone to remain in our children's classrooms.

In my grandfather's home, if you wanted something, the surest way to achieve it was to work for it. That concept, in my mind, also hasn't changed, whether it is an individual or a group, like ourselves, striving for the goal. We have already made progress for this session.

The Joint Interim Committee on Desegregation has done yeoman's work sorting through one of the most difficult issues of our time. Whether you agree with the recommendations or not, everyone should acknowledge their hard work and the fact that the legislature has made a step toward addressing this issue. Similarly, the interim committees on deregulation of utilities, transportation and others have helped sort through issues to give us a head start this session.

This session each and every issue will demand our attention, challenging us to weigh the pros and the cons as we seek to decide if it is in the best interest of the people of Missouri. Our work is cut out for us, as it is every legislative session. It seems as though the needs are ever more pressing, the necessity for our action ever more important.

The turn of the century fast approaches and the decisions we make today will usher in not only a new century, but a new millennium. I am heartened by what we have accomplished in four short years. I believe we can continue that constructive work during this legislative session.

As we busy ourselves with the work of making the laws that will govern the people of the state, it is often easy to forget the ideals that were established by our forefathers as the foundation of our daily work. Those ideals were not based on partisan politics. They were the ideals we agreed to support as a nation, as a people united under common ideals for liberty, justice, and freedom.

We agreed that all people would be equal before the law. We agreed that the people would vest the government with their collective power. We agreed that individual rights should be balanced with the protection of the welfare of the general public.

These principles have been a compelling force through out the course of our history.

They have been inspiration for millions of humans both here and abroad. The fundamental truths they represent beg us to remember them as we continue the work for the next four and a half months.

We have the tendency to think of our daily work, and the political negotiations that encompass it, as a fight between competing opinions. We fail to remember that it is a process by which we strive towards the principles on which our nation was founded. None of us have all the answers. But there must be a common belief that underlies our disagreements -- a belief that we are all involved in our work for the common good.

We are succeeding generations of legislative leaders in Missouri who professed through an oath to the people that they would work together to uphold the truths this state and our nation are founded on. Despite the changes in issues over the years, this commitment has not changed.

Today, let us renew our commitment to work together for the good of the people of this state. We have many challenges ahead, most based upon change. But never changing is our hope to help fulfill the desires of our families, to improve their lives, to help them grow up safe and healthy so they can have a chance to fulfill their dreams. Let us work to provide opportunity, so others have the opportunity to fulfill their dreams.

As Secretary Madeleine Albright said a few months ago: "The path ahead is difficult, but so was the journey already made." We have proven we can accomplish great things for the people of our state. We can and we must continue.

Thank you.